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The emergence of black British social conservatism

Introduction

There is no archetypal black conservative public intellectual in Britain. At a push, one might name VS Naipaul but we have no Clarence Thomas, no one who has consistently intervened in social policy or politics in opposition to supposed liberal drift (Blackler, 2013: 183, describes Thomas as promoting ‘restorative nostalgia’). Historically, to be a black public intellectual in Britain has, almost by definition, meant being located somewhere on the liberal-left spectrum, with all that implies in terms of analyses of culture and economy (Shukra, 1998; Schwarz, 2003). However, in the past decade a number of high profile black thinkers have explicitly positioned themselves at odds with black liberal and radical traditions of thought. While their political biographies are varied, there are grounds for perceiving a shared discourse in their public pronouncements: a discourse of black social conservatism. This paper uses documentary methods to examine this emergent discourse. It examines recent texts produced by black public intellectuals, in order to consider their discursive features, their claims to offer radical rethinking of race, class, youth and education, and their objects of racialization.

Methods and sources

Britain has robust black intellectual traditions, dating back to the abolitionist campaigns of the late 1700s. In the past century they have encompassed dialogues with Marxism, feminism, pan-Africanism, post-colonialism and post-structuralism (Warmington, 2012, 2014). However, despite important historical surveys by, for instance, Gundara and Duffield (1992), black intellectual production has remained under-examined in historical sociology. This paper derives from the author’s ongoing project to locate the distinctive contributions made by black thinkers to social movements in Britain.

This paper’s principal sources are written literature: not only scholarly work but also campaign literature, black journalism and educational materials. The documentary approach is, in part, a response to recent calls among black scholars for greater attention to ‘written’ black history (Walters, 2013). For while ethnographies and oral texts have been of vital importance in tracing the experiences of black communities in Britain (see Kalra, 2006), too

little has said been about written texts. In this paper black texts are treated not only as the focus of study but as a source of theory and conceptualisation, a role black writing still too rarely occupies.

This paper's approach to documentary research draws upon critical theories of race and intellectual production developed in both Britain and the USA (for instance, Bell, 1992; Posnock, 1997) and also upon Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) (particularly, Fairclough, 2000). It considers the incorporation of black voices into public debate in terms of Bell's (1992) concept of racial standing. It utilises aspects of CDA to examine ruptures within ostensibly homogenous discourses and to consider the equivalences and antitheses through which discursive claims are made. In doing so, it positions black intellectuals as powerful speakers: ones entangled in burdens of representation (see Gates, 1992), often caught between speaking 'for' black communities and critiquing racial categories, caught between organic and universal intellectual claims (Posnock, 1997).

The texts discussed in this paper are produced by black British thinkers who have self-defined their standpoints as socially conservative and as skeptical of state multiculturalism. These illustrative texts were largely produced both for academic and for non-specialist 'public' audiences (including radio broadcasts, blogs and journalism). The material examined is selected from the period 2009-2013: a period in which senior government figures made increasingly explicit claims about the end of state multiculturalism (Doward, 2011) and in which, arguably, race and racism were increasingly absented from official debates on education and social policy (Tomlinson, 2008; Gillborn, 2008).

As regards the use of the term 'black', for much of the post-war period the term 'black' has been used politically in the UK to refer not just to people of African descent but also south Asian and Arabic communities. In the past twenty years or so that inclusive definition has not disappeared but its usage has declined, in response to criticisms that political blackness tended to homogenize disparate communities and experiences. Thus the term black is now often used in Britain to refer specifically to those of African-descent. While both definitions remain available according to context, in practice this paper uses the term black to refer mainly to African-Caribbean and black/ white mixed race people because the object of the new black social conservative discourses is primarily African-Caribbean communities.

Historical tensions in black politics

In USA Cornel West described the culture wars in which black public intellectuals became entrenched in the late twentieth century:

On the one hand, there are those who highlight the *structural* constraints on the life chances of black people. This point of view involves a subtle historical and sociological analysis of ...job and residential discrimination, skewed unemployment rates, inadequate healthcare, and poor education. On the other hand, there are those who stress the behavioral impediments to black upward mobility ...the waning of the Protestant ethic – hard work, deferred gratification ...Those in the first camp – the liberal structuralists – call for full employment, health, education and child-care programs, and broad affirmative action ...the second camp – conservative behaviorists – promote self-help programs, black business expansion, and non-preferential job treatment.

(West, 1992: 37)

Such schisms have deep roots in African-American politics, stretching back, at least, to the opposing positions taken by WEB Dubois and Booker T Washington over Washington's accommodationist leadership on issues of political equality. However, in post-war Britain, following mass immigration from the Commonwealth, and in the context of black communities' subsequent struggles around racist violence, policing and schooling, independent black political action was dominated by a wave of new left-leaning activist groups, influenced by American civil rights and Black Power movements, as well as by their 'home' Caribbean traditions. London-based groupings, for instance, were shaped by a number of experienced activists whose roots lay in black Marxism, labour movements and anti-colonialism, such as John La Rose, Jeff Crawford and Eric and Jessica Huntley (Warmington, 2014). Between the 1960s and early 1990s the black left worked in alliance with white workers' movements and anti-racists in both local and national politics. By comparison Britain's centre-right politicians often promoted hostility to black immigration and to multiculturalism and, until the late 1990s-2000s made few overtures to black communities (Shukra, 1998). This is not to say that black communities as a whole were radically to the left or immersed in black nationalism (Farrar, 1992). Nevertheless, the tenor of independent black politics in the late twentieth century did not lend itself to the emergence of organised black conservative groupings.

In academia too, while a range of black theorists emerged from the 1970s onwards, figures as intellectually diverse as Chris Mullard, Stuart Hall, Hazel Carby and Stella Dadzie were all located on the broad left. One black thinker who was harder to classify was Maureen Stone, whose book *The Education of the Black Child*, first appeared in 1981. Stone's book comprised a sociological critique of multicultural education. Her main contention was that multicultural education remained tied to deficit models of the education of black children, being rooted in US research, which argued that black children underachieved in schools, in part, because they were victims of low self-esteem, of racial trauma. Stone (1981) depicted mainstream multicultural education as a form of compensatory education that sought to compensate black children for not being white and middle class by concentrating on building relationships between black children and their (white) teachers, and on building self-esteem by 'teaching' elements of black culture, as filtered through the sensibilities of white liberals. But, Stone asserted, white teachers were not, and were never likely to be, 'significant others' for most black children. Moreover, black culture, insofar as it was formed in part as a dynamic resistance to schooling and other radicalized structures, could hardly be sold back to black pupils by those same schools. As such, Stone (1981) concluded, multicultural education failed at a political level because it ducked the actual power relations that structured educational inequalities in class stratified society; it failed at a cultural level because it dismissed the formal pedagogy that black Caribbean parents understood and valued; and it failed in pragmatic terms because it had had no proven effect on raising black children's attainment.

In her rejection of tokenistic multiculturalism, Stone's critique was not entirely dissimilar to that developed by black Marxist contemporaries, such as Dhondy *et al* (1985) (and indeed Stone drew upon Gramsci and Bernstein). However, her rejection of Marxist ideas about de-schooling, and her acceptance of education in capitalism as a given, distanced her from black Marxists. Stone framed her analysis of race and education in, to adopt Mark Fisher's term, 'capitalist realism' (Fisher, 2009). For, her there was no realistic alternative to education in capitalism. Moreover, Stone's emphasis on the positive role of black parents and black supplementary schools placed implied a discursive claim to pragmatism and authenticity, as opposed to political 'dogma'. Stone's critique was had far greater theoretical nuance than the anti-multiculturalism that features in today's emergent black social conservatism but she may be regarded as one of its antecedents.

The retreat of multiculturalism

The period in which the texts examined in this paper were produced (2009-2013) saw senior government figures made increasingly explicit claims about the end of state multiculturalism (Doward, 2011). By the first two decades of new millennium state multiculturalism (that is, multicultural approaches in policy) had become deeply mired in a discourse of derision (Modood, 2005). What distinguished these criticisms of multiculturalism is that they were advanced not just from traditional heartlands of anti-multiculturalism, rooted in what Gilroy (2004) described as the melancholia of post-imperial Britain, nor from economic Marxists but also from commentators on the centre-left and ‘modernizing’, liberal centre-right (see Goodhart, 2013).

Despite this emergent consensus, a body of sociological work has explored the backlash against state multiculturalism (Kundnani 2017; Watson and Saha, 2012). Debates over the extent to which multiculturalism has been a dominant strand of policy are themselves, of course, highly contentious. However, in a field such as education one might identify the Rampton and Swann Reports, which offered responses to the conditions that led to the urban riots of the early 1980s. One might point also to successive race relations acts, to developments in equalities monitoring, and to government initiatives around language and faith (see Parekh, 2006).

Philips, M. (2001) has argued that the decline of state or municipal multiculturalism began with the demise of ILEA in 1990, with attendant reductions in the funding of ethnic minority community projects and the dispersal of many of the independent black networks active in the 1980s and early 90s. Across the 1990s loss of funding for black community initiatives and anti-racist projects was repeated across Britain. In addition, there is the question of how far the fortunes of independent black politics have waned with the fortunes of the organized left in Britain: a larger one question than can be addressed fully here (see Phillips, 2001; Chakraborty, 2011). Other factors in the state’s putative retreat from multiculturalism, according to, include 9/11, 7/7, the riots across northern Britain in 2001 that grew, in part, out of conflict between white and south Asian Muslim communities, changes in patterns of globalization and migration and brute electoral calculations.

Commissioned by the government in the wake of the northern riots of 2001, The Cattle Report (2001) expanded on the idea of ‘self-segregation’, homing in particularly on areas in the north of England in which different communities effectively lived out ‘parallel lives’ in

education, housing, employment and leisure. (Cantle, 2009: 9) The Cantle Report's primary concern was disintegration between white and Muslim Pakistani/ Bangladeshi communities; its motif was 'community cohesion'. Bloch and Solomos' (2010) perceptive reading of the Cantle Report highlights some of its key messages and contradictions, not least the suggestion that municipal multiculturalism had proven counter-productive: in a sense, based on a claim that there was both too much (state) multiculturalism and too little (factual) multiculturalism. In 2005 the then head of the Commission for Racial Equality Trevor Phillips delivered a speech in Manchester speculating that the political focus on cultural diversity had undermined community cohesion, leaving Britain 'sleepwalking into segregation'. In a speech December 2006 then Prime Minister Tony Blair, while crediting multiculturalism as a factor in shaping a more tolerant Britain, warned against what he perceived as an increasing lack of shared essential values, cautioning that 'we're not going to be taken for a ride' (Blair, 2006: 3). These public interventions suggested post-Cantle 'realism', in which cultural diversity could no longer be sustained, at least as municipal policy. By the end of the first decade of the new millennium, a context had been set for the coming out of new black conservative voices.

The de-racialization of education policy

The texts analysed in this paper show the extent to which the new black social conservatives' iconoclasm has cohered around debates on youth, family and education. Features of this emergent discourse include critiques of state multiculturalism, multicultural education and a renewed behavioural focus on black parenting, youth culture and educational values, principally in relation to black Caribbean communities in Britain's major cities (see Birbalsingh, 2007, 2011; Sewell, 2009, 2010; Mirza, 2010; Johns, 2011; Bailey, BBC 2011). Although, as we shall see, these critiques were profoundly racialized, their central claim was that anti-racists (and, for that matter, black parents and pupils) perpetuated black underachievement by adhering to a defeatist analysis of schools as institutionally racist. Thus the black social conservatives own (racial) standing was reliant on a heterogeneous discourse: simultaneously arguing for a de-racialized understanding of schooling but simultaneously making particular claims about the moral failure of black parents and children.

The critiques of multiculturalism offered by black educators such as Tony Sewell and Kathryn Birbalsingh, and commentators political commentators such as Shaun Bailey, Lindsay Johns and Trevor Phillips, garnered standing in the context of wider

contemporaneous shifts in education and social policy, in which race equality was relegated as a priority. In the USA in late 1990s Manning Marable argued that there had been a profound de-racialization of public policy discourses. What used to be termed race issues had now been ‘subsumed under a murky series of policy talking points, such as affirmative action, minority economic set-asides, crime, welfare reform and the urban “underclass”’ (Marable, 1998: 1). In Britain an equivalent set of policy items for the 1990s and 2000s might include community cohesion, social exclusion and academic underachievement. Certainly, since the early 1990s, education policy in Britain has been increasingly embedded within a discourse of ‘achievement’ and its converse ‘underachievement’. This reifying concern with achievement was the outcome of the UK system’s drift towards credentialism, wherein the success of the education sector, of individual schools and individual pupils was quantified through exam performance (Ball, 2008).

For example, in their study of the educational experiences of British-Chinese pupils, Louise Archer and Becky Francis argued that the dominance of the achievement paradigm, rooted in a narrow, credentialist conception of education experience and achievement was:

...amply illustrated by the proliferation of testing regimes, academic league tables and the regular, high profile publication of achievement statistics from children’s earliest years through to GCSEs and into post-compulsory education. Indeed we would assert that achievement is not just an educational issue – for the current government, it is *the* educational issue.

(Archer and Francis, 2007; xiii)

Tomlinson (2008) argued that the centre-right Conservative government ‘between 1990 and 1997, virtually removed issues concerning racial and ethnic inequalities in education from political consideration,’ (Tomlinson, 2008: 153) insisting instead on a colour-blind model of fairness. The result, Tomlinson (2008) claimed was a painfully atrophied framework for addressing racial inequality in education:

One of the effects of the concern with standards and achievement was that it drew attention to education as a site in which the outcomes of ‘black and minority ethnic’ groups were increasingly differentiated from one another. However, ethnic monitoring of under-achievement was not merely a descriptor of a prior phenomenon; it also enabled policy-

makers to quantify racial inequality in education and to discount racism as a continued factor in the experiences of black or BME students. Archer and Francis suggest that today:

...issues of race/ ethnicity are really only acknowledged by or addressed by education policy within the context of 'underachievement' ... issues of race have been subject to a pernicious turn in policy discourse which removes the means for engaging with inequalities, naturalises differences in achievement between ethnic groups and places the responsibility for achievement differentials with minority ethnic individuals. This discourse denies racism as a potential cause of differences in achievement and hides inequalities within congratulatory public statements.

(Archer and Francis, 2007: 1)

In short, by shying away from the structural – funding, resourcing, curriculum, teacher training – and tending to individualized explanations of achievement/ underachievement, the discourse offered a means to normalise racial inequalities and to return to the pathologization of particular black communities, pupils and parents, albeit decked out in new language. This was apparent not least in what Tomlinson (2008) has identified as the construction of model minorities. If racism was a persistent factor in education, then the implication, why did Chinese and Indian pupils succeed where African-Caribbeans failed? So it is that black (Caribbean) parenting, educational aspirations, youth subcultures, faith and self-segregation have again become the usual suspects in debates over black underachievement.

The new black social conservatives

The framing of multiculturalism and race equality as old, dead tropes that must be superseded has been given claims to credibility by the public interventions of what might be described as a new wave of black social conservatives, who have been afforded a rare (for black thinkers) degree of access to party political and news media platforms. These black conservative analyses share several discursive features: critiques of multiculturalism; suggestions that black pupils have been ill-served by liberal teaching methods; and a renewed 'behavioural' focus on black parenting, youth culture and educational values. Their analyses are often framed by the claim that black British communities are essentially 'socially conservative' and have been pawns, rather than drivers or beneficiaries, of 'liberal' multiculturalism. They have consciously positioned themselves as both socially conservative (in their claim to black 'authenticity') and as 'new' (in relation to their rejection of multiculturalism). Whereas

contemporary cultural theorists, such as Arun Kundnani have pointed to the mutability of racism, identifying new manifestations of nativism and Islamophobia, the black social conservatives make the bold claim that racism has not shifted shape but has actually receded (Old prejudices have faded ... Race is no longer the significant disadvantage it is often portrayed to be' Mirza, M., 2010: 31-32).

Importantly, while there have undoubtedly been black conservative educators active at local level during the post-war period, these new iconoclasts base their arguments on a new claim, one not available in the 1960s and 70s: the claim that Britain has attempted a multicultural approach over several decades and that actually existing multicultural has been tried and has failed – failed black children. Thus their critiques are not presented simply as anti-multiculturalism but as *post*-multiculturalism. For Sewell and others, such as Mirza (2010) and Johns (2011), the premises of actually existing British multiculturalism have ceased to match the landscape of fact (see also Woledge, 2013).

A break with the past?

Although far from cohesive, this emergent discourse might usefully be described as a new black social conservatism. Its founding narrative is the claim is that, in the 1970s and 80s, state multiculturalism and alliances between black activists and the British left produced misrecognition of the values of black British communities. The consequences have been an atrophied black politics, ossified in discourses of oppression and rebellion, and generations (particularly of African-Caribbean youth) locked into patterns of educational underachievement.

For example, in a 2011 Radio Four broadcast Trevor Phillips historicized the black social conservative discourse.

In a sense, what you saw in the first half of the 80s was the left outsourcing its anger and its outrage to ethnic minorities. And that is what really characterised “black” politics ...it put the African Caribbean community in a box, parts of which it doesn't feel comfortable with. African Caribbeans historically are socially conservative and there are some aspects of left politics that that community as a whole is not comfortable with...

(Phillips, T., BBC Radio Four, 2011)

Phillips, former Head of the Commission for Racial Equality (2003-2006) and subsequently Chair (2007-12) of its successor, the Equality and Human Rights Commission, remains one of the most prominent black voices in the field of social policy. A veteran equalities activist, Phillips has epitomized a particular double bind, sometimes being depicted by the black left as an establishment figure, and at other times being demonized by right-wing press as a radical multiculturalist. In 2005, for instance, Phillips was derided in conservative media quarters when he suggested that separate classes might enable black boys to overcome poor school achievement. Phillips' repositioning of himself in relation to historical alliances between black communities and left politics was, therefore, a notable shift.

Indeed, the putative black social conservative discourse is characterised by deliberate breaks with the social analyses developed by the black and anti-racist left. These are predicated on a particular authenticity claim: that the black socially conservative voice is not new at all but an 'authentic' voice that historically was marginalised by black activists' alliances with the broader, socially liberal left (BBC Radio Four, 2011). Yet alongside this claim to cultural and historical authenticity, the black social conservative discourse also paradoxically makes a claim to innovation, arguing the need to 'move on' politically, to cease replaying the battles of post-war black politics, embedded in discourses of conflict and oppression.

The major black British public intellectual currents of the post-war period have not, by any means, been homogenous but dominant elements of black left discourses have included claims that:

- racism remains salient in the social and political formation, necessitating commitment to anti-racist struggle
- the structures of education, the labour market and criminal justice tend to reproduce racial inequalities
- independent black thinkers should be critical of assimilationist politics, and advocate cultural pluralism as part of wider drives for social justice
- black educational underperformance must be understood as the product of wider deprivation and social antagonisms

- black communities constitute, in alliance, with other disadvantaged social groups, a potentially progressive political force.

Historically, there have been black and minority ethnic thinkers who have critiqued particular elements of these positions: for instance Paul Gilroy's (1987) critique of the anti-racist politics of the white left and Sivanandan (1982) and Carby's (1999) critiques of the emphasis on facile forms of cultural diversity. However, their critiques were positioned in opposition to approaches that abstracted black cultural expression from black political struggles; they regarded anti-oppressive struggles around race and class as necessary ones.

The discourse of black social conservatism

The years 2009-2013 saw the new black conservative voices take root as a public presence. It was a period that saw the demise of the New Labour government that held office from 1997 to 2010. Within a few months of coming to office the new Conservative Prime Minister David Cameron declared that multiculturalism had 'failed' (Doward, 2011). Summer 2011 saw the most widespread rioting in England's major cities since the mid-1980s and political responses to the riots invoked the image of a broken society, a discourse in which the youth of multi-ethnic urban centres figured strongly. Moreover, anxieties over multiculturalism produced a moral panic over inequalities experienced by fractions of the white working class (see Gillborn's, 2010, analysis of this turn).

It was in this context that the critiques of multiculturalism and multicultural education offered by a number of black thinkers, including Tony Sewell, Katharine Birbalsingh and Trevor Phillips, were accorded levels of mainstream media attention rarely given to black commentators. These included media coverage of book publications, political party conference speeches and comments on the aftermath of the riots of summer 2011. Educator Tony Sewell had, in the 1990s, developed analyses of race and schooling that explored oppositional relationships between black boys and white teachers that focused on complex dynamics of cultural racism, hyper-masculinity, school conflict and survival (Sewell, 1997). A decade later, Sewell's writing shifted in emphasis towards behavioural explanations of black boys' underachievement and criticism of the impact of 'liberal' teaching methods on the school experiences of African-Caribbean and mixed-race boys.

Newer voices included teacher and writer Katharine Birbalsingh. She became prominent following a controversial speech to the Conservative Party Conference in 2010, in which she

attacked what she saw as cultures of chaos, low expectations and failure in Britain's state schools (Birbalsingh, 2010a). In the aftermath Birbalsingh lost her job as a deputy head, was widely defended within the Conservative Party and the centre-right press and protested in her online account of events, that she would not be 'silenced while our children are betrayed by schools' Birbalsingh (2010b). Also during 2010-11 the centre-left magazine *Prospect* began to provide a platform for black British intellectuals (including Sewell) who were publicly critical of state multiculturalism and whose analyses of youth and education were embedded in the discourse of black social conservatism. Other black voices invoking black social conservatism included black voices from both the Conservative Party, such as Shaun Bailey, Samuel Kasumu and Kwasi Kwarteng, and the Labour Party's David Lammy. MP for the racially mixed ward of Tottenham, Lammy (2011) offered considered reflections on the riots of summer 2011. However, subsequent media coverage chose to home in on Lammy's 'social conservative' criticisms of liberal middle-class culture's opposition to corporal punishment.

While its origins were diverse, the putative black 'conservative' discourse contained recurrent features that were heretical, in that they entered territory long considered out of bounds by black British intellectuals. This was particularly apparent in black conservative analyses of race and education. Discursive features included:

- suggestions that race and racism have declined in salience in the UK
- claims that multiculturalism and anti-racism have *over time* promoted cultures of victimhood, particularly among black male pupils
- arguments that black Caribbean underachievement is due, at least in part, to anti-school cultures and poor parental support for schools and children
- arguments that *decades of* multicultural education and other liberal learning and teaching approaches have failed black children and are culturally at odds with the 'social conservatism' of black communities
- claims that the educational success of high achieving minority ethnic groups casts doubt on arguments that structural / institutional racism is salient in schools
- the association of multiculturalism and radical black politics with 'the past', as 'old', as outdated

Black and anti-racist thinkers had long opposed explanations of educational failure that they regarded as pathologizing black pupils and their communities. However, the new black social conservatism was largely defined in debates on educational underachievement and parental failure (see Warmington, 2014).

Liberal structuralists and conservative behaviourists

Threaded through black conservative analyses of education was the claim that liberal multiculturalists had blamed structural racism for black pupils' continued underachievement, particularly that of African-Caribbean boys, while shying away from black parents and pupils' own role in creating damaging school relationships. In the 1990s Tony Sewell's influential *Black Masculinities and Schooling: how Black boys survive modern schooling* (Sewell, 1997) had exemplified tensions between structural and behavioural analyses of race and education. Sewell (1997) began by offering a structural analysis of how African-Caribbean boys were located in a school system that reproduced racial inequalities. However, Sewell's preference was for subcultural analysis of black boys' racialized and gendered social practices and in the latter part of the book Sewell's subcultural analysis largely superseded structural analysis of the school system. Sewell's early work, therefore, was pitched in the midst of a dialogue – or non-dialogue - akin to the one that Cornel West (1992) described in the US context.

Double victims: representing multiculturalism as oppressor

Where then did Sewell stand in the chasm between liberal structuralists and conservative behaviourists? By the time Sewell published *Generating Genius: black boys in search of love, ritual and schooling* in 2009, his position was less agnostic. Sewell (2009) comprised an evaluation of his intervention projects for African-Caribbean boys at risk of school failure. In his account Sewell now explicitly rejected an overly structural approach:

The idea that students are powerless victims in a wider 'game' of institutional racism is nothing less than patronising. Even when faced with white racism, these black students are their own worst enemies.

(Sewell, 2009: 55)

For Sewell the error of many structural analyses of black boys' underachievement lay in seeing only top-down institutional power. Sewell now explored what he regarded as the

under-acknowledged power of peer pressure: the deriding of educational success by some black boys as ‘acting white’, cults of anti-intellectualism and reliance on dependence on defensive hyper-masculinity. However, in his subsequent development of his analysis, Sewell did not abandon the notion of black boys as structural victims; he spoke of the Generating Genius project as a process of shielding black boys ‘from those who want them to wallow in self-pity’ (Sewell, 2010: 34). For Sewell, it seemed, generations of black boys had become victims of liberal approaches to multiculturalism and education that ‘excused’ black failure on the grounds that it was the inevitable product of wider social disadvantage.

In autumn 2010 Sewell was among four black thinkers featured in left-leaning *Prospect* magazine’s cover story, titled ‘Rethinking race: has multiculturalism had its day?’

Encompassing views on education, psychiatry, the arts and issues of community cohesion, the thematic thrust was against the ghettoization, low expectations and weak analyses of race and social justice that, the authors claimed, derived from Britain’s attachment to outdated models of the politic of race and multiculturalism. Years of lip-service to anti-racism in education had, Sewell suggested, underdeveloped young black minds:

The bad boys in that class had a default reaction – all their experience was seen through the lens of racism. They had no measure to understand their lives other than that of the victim ... We have a generation who have all the language and discourse of the race relations industry but no devil to fight ... Much of the supposed evidence of institutional racism is flimsy.

In a somersaulting double-victimology, therefore, Sewell simultaneously argued that black boys must abandon the false consciousness of victimhood, while also insisting that black boys *really were* victims - victims of a kind of liberal racism.

This double-victimology became a motif among black conservative commentators. Katharine Birbalsingh’s controversial blogs became the basis of her book, *To Miss with Love* (Birbalsingh, 2011). In the book Birbalsingh positioned herself as both heretical and authentic: a comprehensive pupil who had progressed to Oxford, an Oxford graduate who taught for many years in inner-city schools and who was unafraid of critiquing the assumptions that she insisted enabled teachers and pupils to co-exist in failure.

Black kids all have that winning ace up their sleeve, which they can play when the going gets really tough – the race card: ‘It’s cause I is black, innit ... She hates us

‘cause we is black ...if the black kid has got himself a slightly scared new white teacher, he is in serious business. He has got them running scared.

(Birbalsingh, 2011: 55)

Here the echoes of Sewell, even of Maureen Stone, were coarsened into an eschatology of double-victimhood: black victim of failed liberal schooling bests white teacher; white liberal teacher abandons black child.

Birbalsingh has also been explicit in asserting that it is not only black pupils who have consented to liberal victimology. For her, black adults have been happy to suck up anti-racist rhetoric as a diversion from their own failure. In an on-line defence of Tony Sewell's work, Birbalsingh offers her own understanding of Sewell's position:

He merely speaks the truth. He has written about the underachievement of black children (often boys), in books, newspapers and magazines, highlighting the problem of absent fathers, MTV and gang culture, and the black community's refusal to trust the education system and take responsibility for themselves.

(Birbalsingh, 2007)

While Birbalsingh may be excused the intemperate language of blogging, her assertions here about black consent to victimhood and black parents' collusion in their children's educational failure have remained key themes in her writing (Birbalsingh, 2011). Yet Birbalsingh's discourse is far from being homogenous. When discussing anti-racists' claims that structural racism is present in schools Birbalsingh (2007) has expressed indignation on the part of schools teachers. However, when arguing the need for reform of the school sector and decrying the low expectations of liberal educators, she discursively locates teachers and schools not as committed professionals falsely accused but instead as part of the problem:

The real problem is our educational culture, so full of sloppiness and sentimentality, dumbing-down and deceit. Bad behaviour is tolerated too easily, poor performance covered-up ... Yes there is racism in the system, but it usually comes from guilt-ridden white liberals who allow young blacks to remain trapped in the downward cycle of failure.

(Birbalsingh, 2010b)

As with Sewell a critique of anti-racist education that is presented as homogenous relies upon discursive rifts: our schools and teachers are not racist, except when they are, except when they are anti-racist. Moreover, the repudiation of the labelling of black communities as necessarily low-achieving relies, in Birbalsingh and Sewell's accounts, upon a racialized depiction of black communities as (at least in some fractions) lacking commitment to education.

Black conservative authenticity

The self-framing of commentators such as Sewell and Birbalsingh as authentic voices with long experience of inner-city schooling is itself strangely contradictory. These critics of multiculturalism's appeals to identity politics were themselves apparently validated by their authentic identities. For example, *Prospect's* 'Rethinking Race' edition was introduced by Munira Mirza with the assertion that:

The following articles are by people who want to change the way in which racism and diversity are discussed in Britain and question the assumptions of some "official anti-racism". None of them is white and therefore cannot easily be dismissed as ignorant, naïve or unwittingly prejudiced.'

(Mirza, 2010: 31)

For her part, Birbalsingh opened her blog with the declaration:

I'm a black teacher in inner-city London and here are some of my stories... I love my job and I love these kids. But boy, do I sometimes wonder why...

(Birbalsingh, 2007)

Moreover, the authentic classroom accounts of Sewell and Birbalsingh had the ring of allegory, as when Sewell recounted winning over a table of (black) bad boys, encouraging them to excel in a classroom task, by the lure of a prize of a box of chocolates:

There we have it: the trauma of 400 years of racism, slavery and oppression overcome by the desire for a soft-centre ...At the end of the lesson ...The winner was Table 5.

They had worked with their meagre resources and come up with something magnificent.

(Sewell, 2010: 33)

Here structures, institutions and history were downplayed. The allegory was clear. Black pupils could pull themselves up by marshalling their meagre resources into success. Like Maureen Stone, Sewell's analysis of race and schooling is embedded in what Fisher (2009) has termed 'capitalist realism', wherein contemporary neo-liberalism is represented as permanent, the only realistically attainable mode of social organization, with all that implies about the permanence of inequalities produced by credentialism, higher education and differential cultural capital.

A new black politics?

In autumn 2011 BBC Radio Four devoted an edition of its current affairs programme *Analysis*, to the emergence of what it termed 'A New Black Politics'. Presented by *Prospect's* David Goodhart, it featured contributions both from veteran black 'left' intellectuals, including Trevor Phillips, Linda Bellos, Stafford and David Lammy MP, and newer 'conservative' voices, including Kwasi Kwarteng MP and Shaun Bailey. The programme focused on whether the responses of black thinkers and activists to that summer's riots signalled a rift between older black British left traditions and newer figures who questioned the discourses of anti-racism. Did activists who had grown up with the racial politics of the 1970 and 80s speak for black Britain in 2011 or were they, as Goodhart (BBC Radio 4, 2011: 13) put it, old generals still 'fighting the last war'?

Pointedly, the programme repeatedly asked whether the priorities of the black and anti-racist left had truncated the aspirations of young black people in education and employment, particularly young African-Caribbean men. Here Goodhart's editorial comments echoed the rhetoric of Sewell and Birbalsingh:

Is British society still to blame for some of the real problems facing some young black, urban men, or are they the authors of their own misfortune or at least victims of an ideology that says they can only fail in British society, thus ensuring that they do?

(Goodhart, BBC Radio 4, 2011: 11)

The programme offered reflections on the disparities between underachievement in African-Caribbean communities and the greater successes in education and employment of East African Asians, the legacies of the schooling of black children in the 1960s and 70s, and the ways in which black politics was shaped the politics of anti-racist protest in the 1980s. Once again, social conservatism was proposed as an authentic representation of silent black values. In the words of Conservative parliamentary candidate, Shaun Bailey (described in the programme as an ‘authentically “street” black west Londoner’):

I think now black communities are reaching a point where they think well hold on a second, at our heart, at least socially, we’re very conservative and we are now beginning to compromise some of our core beliefs.

(Bailey, BBC Radio 4, 2011: 3)

The word ‘now’ is the key to Bailey’s quote. Like Goodhart’s reference to old anti-racist generals still fighting the last war and Phillips’ reflections on what happened in the 1980s, it locates black social conservatism not just as a ‘return’ to authentic black values but as a movement forward to new understandings of race in British life. Whether or not black social conservatism claims to be post-racial, its proponents certainly locate themselves as post-multicultural. Multiculturalism and anti-racism are declared anachronistic. However, in social policy and public debate forward motion is not only defined temporally; it is also a discursive product. What counts as ‘old’ or ‘new’ is politically determined.

Conclusion

The purpose of this paper’s analysis is not to suggest that black thinkers should automatically cleave to the left. One thing with which black British social conservatism can be credited is a refusal, at least to an extent, to deny the gamut of black experiences and political positions. As such, this paper aims to give serious consideration to a black discourse that, as yet, has received little sociological attention.

The ‘new’ black social conservatism has a problematic relationship to black radical traditions and iconography. This is perhaps why the new black conservative voices, have rarely been remarked upon. Yet, while black conservative intellectuals are a minority within a minority, they have garnered significant media space and forged links with policy-makers. Moreover, as much as their counterparts on the ‘liberal-structuralist’ left, Britain’s black social

conservatives embody the ‘impossibilities’ of black intellectual life (Posnock, 2007). Their ‘behavioural’ analyses of black underachievement form an instance of what Said (1996) described as the ‘the problem of loyalty’ to community. Moreover, for black intellectuals focusing on education, problems of loyalty apply not only to their relationships to black communities but equally to the dilemmas experienced as educators who are part implicated in the sector’s racialized processes and outcomes.

To understand the emergence of these black social conservative voices, perhaps we should turn again also to Derrick Bell’s ‘rules of racial standing’ (Bell, 1992), wherein Bell defines (and satirizes) the racialized dynamics of the public sphere. In particular, Bell asserts that ‘Few blacks avoid diminishment of racial standing ... the usual exception ... is the black person who publicly disparages ... other blacks who are speaking or acting in ways that upset whites’ (Bell 1992: 114). Their ‘exceptional’ statements are granted enhanced standing, even when they have no special expertise or experience in the field. Bell (1992) also states that when a black person or group makes ‘outrageous’ statements on race, vocal components of the white community will actively recruit and reward black critics of those blacks who have spoken out of turn.

Now not all of the black conservative commentators on race, education, youth and community can be described as ‘unqualified’. Birbalsingh and Sewell are experienced educators, although their reliance on allegory, anecdote and what Stuart Hall might have termed ‘innocent’ readings of black authenticity perhaps outweighs their research evidence base. (That is, they invoke their authenticity as their key qualification for making generalizations both about black communities and multiculturalism.) It would also be fairly easy to see them as recruits to the current derision of multiculturalism. However, they also suggest a variant of Bell’s rules of racial standing, in that they represent themselves not just as critics of ‘inauthentic’, ‘outdated’ black leftists but as scourges of a white liberalism that has served only to oppress black pupils and communities. Their black ‘authenticity’ is derived from positioning themselves in opposition to white liberal educators. That positioning is the feint that draws attention away from their disparaging of other blacks.

The new black social conservatives invoke a convoluted discourse of victimhood that claims equivalence between disparate phenomena. They claim that liberal multiculturalism has promoted a sense of victimhood that black pupils need to shed. In doing so, they argue that black pupils actually *are* victims – but of liberalism, rather than racism. They argue that they

too, as black commentators, have also been victims of powerful liberals who have suppressed 'real' cultural diversity. Thus the discourse of black social conservatism crafts an antithesis (to use CDA terms) between multiculturalism and 'authentic' cultural diversity. Its other building blocks include the creation of antitheses (again, in CDA term) between 'liberal' teachers and 'conservative' black parents, and between underachieving black (African-Caribbean) children and other, better achieving 'model' ethnic minorities, such as Chinese and Indian pupils. Black 'conservative' discourses also create equivalences, so that black pupils' underachievement is equated (and held to be the product of) anti-school subcultures. It should also be noted that because the rationale of the new black conservatism is dependent on depictions of underachieving African-Caribbean young men, it remains largely silent on the experiences of black women and of Asian communities, except those that serve as model minorities in the discourse. The 'conservatism' of Muslim communities, of course, remains too problematic to be absorbed into the black conservative discourse.

Importantly, the new black conservative discourse is also reached by its adherents proclaiming themselves not just anti- but *post*-multiculturalism. The discursive warrant of black social conservatives rests on a claim to authenticity but it also rests on a claim to newness. Discursively, this is achieved by equating 'honest' authenticity with political novelty. Thus their enhanced racial standing is also enhanced historical-temporal standing. But judged both by what it includes and what it excludes, the new black social conservatism, while representing itself as a shift beyond the old wars, it also resembles old forms of pathologization. The new black social conservatism quite reasonably contends that new questions can be asked about race and identity in twenty-first century Britain. But its emergent voices have, as yet, done little in the way of posing new questions. Its claims about the effects of multiculturalism, the decline of racism and the failings of black communities, for the present, would seem to comprise a rhetorical claim to 'newness' and political vitality, rather than a coherent critique of current social relationships.

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